



Teaching Digital Communication: Strategies for Multimodal Composition and Holistic Design

Why this document? This is a resource for faculty who are teaching what LaGuardia calls the Digital Communication Ability.

- The first page or so defines the Digital Ability as part of the College's General Education Core Competency and Communication Abilities framework.
- The second page includes "Step-by-Step" directions for students composing with digital tools. Faculty are encouraged to adapt the steps for their own assignment design, or for ideas about how to scaffold digital composition into their courses.

What is the digital ability? Like other forms of communication, digital communication imparts messages to others, constructs knowledge, fosters understanding, and/or influences opinion. Digital communication employs an evolving range of digital tools and platforms for purposeful composition, including but not limited to websites, ePortfolios, PowerPoint presentations, multimedia blogs and social media platforms, and digital stories. Effective digital composition will advance the content and purpose of the communication through creative juxtaposition of media as part of a balanced, purposeful visual design.

Why does the digital ability matter? Teaching the digital ability strengthens our students' ability to effectively use digital communication in their ongoing education and career development. Designing and interacting with blogs, websites, and digital materials in general are and will be part of many jobs for students. Engaging in the digital world of blogs, comments sections of articles, and social media posts are a big part of how we are civically engaged today, so teaching our students to do so productively and respectfully helps our students to be good global citizens.

Using 21st century tools and platforms can propel students to design new ways to circulate their voice and visions to others. We want students to create compositions that look, sound, and feel like the media they consume. We hope in the process that they become more discerning consumers of digital media, since that's the primary way that students are getting news, interacting with peers, and communicating with institutions. Our aim is for students to become active problem-solvers about key issues in digital communication, including audience, privacy, publicity, fair use, and citation.

How do I adapt digital tools for my assignment? Faculty teaching in different courses and programs will integrate digital tools, platforms, and elements into new or existing assignments after carefully considering what works best for them.

When considering what tool(s) add to your curriculum, remember we're not using technology for technology's sake, but because digital tools can advance purpose and content when and where appropriate. There is such thing as digital overload, so faculty should consider emphasizing those tools that really add richness to an assignment.

What should I consider when choosing a tool? While this handout addresses Digitation ePortfolio specifically, faculty selecting tools in general might consider a few things:

- **Access.** Does the tool require another login? How many logins are the students managing for your course? If you're using Blackboard or a course blog, can it be easily plugged in or integrated in another way?
- **Learning Curve.** How easy is the tool to navigate and to pick up? How should the tool or platform be scaffolded into the course? What kinds of instructions are necessary?
- **Design.** What features or design elements will you emphasize? Are there templates or best practices to be considered? These considerations will impact your students' sense of enjoyment/ satisfaction in using the tool.

The steps below address some tactics faculty may find helpful.

Step-by-Step Assignment Design for the Digital Communication Ability

These steps were written with a high-stakes 'digital essay' in mind using Digitation ePortfolio. Considering all the steps of composing from pre-writing to revision, faculty will want to decide when the introduction and integration of a digital platform should take place for their assignment. For those interested in step-by-step assignment design for a Core Competency, please see our [Assessment Guide](#). Most of the steps are directed at a student actively composing in a digital platform.

1. **Consider the composition process.** As with most high-stakes writing, digital composition may require multiple drafts instead of a clear delineation between pre-digital and post-digital versions.
 - Some students and/or faculty might feel that it's important for students to begin with a clear idea of what they want to argue, and to understand the purpose of their project before they begin "making it digital." For some, it can be helpful to have a written draft in place as a student imagines where and how multimodal elements might strengthen their purpose, and how design choices, from background color to banner images, will enhance the main ideas of their project. It's easier to decide what tools to use, and what media to integrate and where, once the project is clearly defined and the parts of the project are in place.
 - On the other hand, some students and/or faculty may find it useful to begin composing within the platform. They may feel that there's something to be said for the "thinking in public" that digital tools allow. So, for instance, in Digitation ePortfolio, students could do peer review of drafts using the in-line comments, or you could have students draft and do peer-review using Google docs before going live.

- Faculty might ask students to try story-boarding and/or an assignment that asks students to reflect on the visual rhetoric of their composition to develop their process for creating their work.
 - As students begin the process of incorporating media and design, it will be important to continually ask how the process of multimodal media might shift certain aspects of the student's writing, argument, or organization. The writing process will evolve their ideas, but composing with digital tools might also change what they argue and why.
2. **Plan your digital interventions.** Looking at a draft, note the potential places where you'd want to enhance an argumentative claim, illustrate a summary of a source, or deepen a critical reflection on the evidence with forms of digital media. What would work best and why? A photograph? A data graphic? A link to a website? A video? An audio file? Once you've provisionally located where you want to enhance or illustrate ideas in the paper, it's time to select the kinds of media and data you'd like to use.
 3. **Track your sources.** As you conduct web searches, create a new document where you can paste links to web sources, sites, images, and videos you'd like to use. It's essential to track the origins of everything you use. You will need a comprehensive bibliography that will cite everything you incorporate from the web.
 4. **Choose the best media for your purpose.** As you search, don't just grab what you see first. Filter your searches by asking yourself why a particular image, link, video, or graphic is best suited to enhance or illustrate part of your project. One solid way to practice this filtering technique is to find two or three choices for every decision, and then make a decision defined by why one particular image, link, video, or graphic is better suited to your project than the other options. Nonetheless, save those other choices because they might be better choices for other parts of the project.
 - You may want to ask yourself, how can an image or collage of images communicate something that may be difficult to communicate in words? How does the overall combination of visual elements shape the viewers' feelings, as well as their thinking?
 - Some faculty may want to direct students to search for materials in the public domains, licensed for educational use, or in academic and digital commons.
 5. **Design your project for the platform.** Before integrating any digital tools or media into your project, first design how you want to use the platform you've chosen. This may take the form of an outline, or a written map of the project.
 - In the case of ePortfolio, before building your digital essay you might first sketch out your plan on a piece of paper. Please consider adding a landing page (or splash page) and decide on an "about me" page. You'll also need a comprehensive bibliography page (one that includes all textual and media sources). You might also want to decide a couple core background colors, design elements, or page layouts for the sake of consistency.

6. **Design your text for a viewer's thoughts and feelings.** Once you've decided on the core page elements, look at your paragraphs and think how you might arrange the text so that your readers can easily understand both the text and follow the sequence of your thoughts. You'll likely need to play with the size of the text as font, the size of the text heading (a kind of mini-title, title, or headline for each page), the number of sentences per paragraph, and the location of the text on the page.
 - You may want to ask yourself how different colors or color combinations contribute to your overall message. How do your design choices shape a viewers' perception? How does the overall combination of visual and design elements shape the viewers' feelings, as well as their thinking?
7. **Clarify the textual and multimodal elements for an outside audience.** After you've incorporated multimodal design into your pages and organized your site, consider what new texts, graphics, images, or videos need captions or other forms of written explanation. Do you want to explain the meaning of what you chose in a caption? Do you want to refer to the images, videos, or graphics within the body of the writing itself? There should be a clear connection between what you chose to illustrate, support, advance, and/or enhance your writing and what you wrote. Readers and viewers should not have to guess the meaning or relationship between what they're seeing and what you're arguing and discussing in your writing.
8. **Peer Review your digital composition.** Once you believe you've successfully arranged and designed your site, show it to someone else and ask for feedback. You might want to receive feedback on the following elements:
 - Would an audience, reader, or user from outside the class have a clear understanding of what you're doing if they came to your site without any prior knowledge?
 - Does the overall design feel accessible and readable?
 - Do the multimodal elements have a clear relation to what you're arguing and/or writing?
 - Are there any aspects of the design that could be strengthened?
 - Are all the sources of information, data, images, and video properly cited, sourced, and linked? Are they part of a comprehensive bibliography that also includes the sources you're using for the essay?
9. **Polish your composition for audience.** Before make the project public, review it to make sure your arguments are clear, your summaries of textual sources are directed toward an outside audience, your core evidence is clearly quoted and correctly cited, and your interpretation of evidence and critical thinking adequately expands on the meaning of what you're saying in ways that are logical, original, and fresh.

10. **Polish your composition for accessibility.** To ensure that your composition is as accessible as possible to the broadest audience, including those with disabilities, you should format with the principles of accessibility in education in mind, which you can learn more about on CUNY's [IT Accessibility Statement and Resources site](#) (See links along the left-hand side of the page for more information).
- Practically speaking, this means that you should provide alternative text (alt text) for images and video, and use real hyperlinks, instead of “click here” or the entire URL, when linking to other websites. Alt text is a way to describe an image to ensure all users, regardless of visual ability, can access your content. Alt text should explain anything you want the reader to get out of the image, including data if the image is a chart with important information. Describe the image or video you've chosen in relationship to the theme or claim you're making in your writing. See this site for step-by-step instructions on [how to add alt text in Digication ePortfolio](#).
 - In addition to or instead of alt text, you can also include a caption for the image or a transcript of a video in the text of your document. Such captions can complement the areas in your prose where you explain the relationship between your visual media and the purpose of your claim, paragraph, evidence, or critical thinking. When using hyperlinks, use meaningful text instead of “click here” or the entire URL, so that users accessing the page with a screen reader will be able to understand what the link will lead to. See this site for instructions on [how to add hyperlinks in ePortfolio](#).
11. **Reflect on your work.** Once you're done, you may want to ask yourself what you learned about digital communication. What's most effective about it? How is it similar to – and different from – written and oral communication? What should other students keep in mind who design similar projects? How has your experience designing with digital tools shaped your experience of consuming digital media?